

A litmus test for caretaker government's cleansing actions



The newly industrialized countries (NICs) of Southeast Asia, including South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, China as well as Japan are constantly looking for low-wage countries to produce parts and components of their durable, intermediate and capital goods in a cost-effective manner. Bangladesh is being constantly approached by these countries to allow them to utilize the Bangladeshi reserve pool of semi-skilled and skilled labour.

ASHRAF ALI

HERE are obvious questions on people's minds: should the caretaker government (CG) stay on longer and carry out the cleansing actions, or handover power after the scheduled election?

Currently, the CG appears to be reacting to the existing ills of the economy and society created by three classes of Bangladeshis: politicians, bureaucrats (civilian and military) and traders, who have so far held the development aspiration of the country hostage. The rent-seeking activities of these three classes are well-documented, and are identified as the major obstacle to Bangladesh's real economic development.

The actions by the CG may be characterized as a defensive move, and a mere "show," in the absence of a formal and concrete nation-building step taken in parallel. This step means taking an initiative for massive development of domestic production of durable and capital goods with significant local components, as well as local research and development (R&D).

The said initiative should be treated as a matter of national security and should be protected at any cost by the armed forces and other Bangladeshi national security apparatus.

It may be noted that all industrially developed countries, such as those in North America, Western Europe and Japan, etc., invariably identify a

cluster of important industrial complexes as integral parts of national security. The government protects these companies at any cost.

Furthermore, by definition, these nation-building initiatives should be independent of political party politics. No matter which party comes to power in future, it should protect these vital industries, exactly the way it is done in all developed countries.

For example, the US political parties, Democrats and Republicans alike, have the same view towards promoting and protecting important US industries vital for its national security.

People are asking themselves the question; where is the CG drawing its strength from, to undertake this cleansing initiative that dares to cross

all party lines, and who is really calling the shots? Who is the CG trying to impress if it is not carrying out necessary nation-building policies and programs?

A return to the status quo, without any nation-building steps, means a return to the same rent-seeking activities which enrich (a) the aforementioned three classes of Bangladeshis and (b) their accomplices – the industrially advanced countries.

The latter, with help from the former, must sell their high-priced goods in Bangladesh, and make sure that local competitor industries do not emerge and pose a threat to the corresponding industries in their respective home countries.

Thus, it becomes painfully clear that nation-building through establishment of domestic durable and capital goods industries is not in the best interest of this alliance.

As a matter of fact, the alliance would go to great lengths to secure uninterrupted influx of durable, intermediate and capital goods into Bangladesh, and at the same time use various means to destroy any aspiration on the part of any local

entrepreneur to engage in the production of these goods.

No country in the world can advance economically without producing durable, intermediate and capital goods domestically. The production of these goods can alone provide the "depth of individual productivity" that is needed for true nation-building.

In contrast, milk and egg selling, basket weaving, adult education, etc., the low-intensity economic activities undertaken and promoted by the non-government organizations (NGOs) engaged in Bangladesh, such as Grameen Bank, Brac, Gonoshastha Cendro, and so on, can only sustain subsistence-level national productivity, which is known to be only around \$1 daily per person.

The NGO activities not only limit individual productivity among the masses, but also hinder establishment of domestic durable, intermediate and capital goods industries. No one should have the illusion that NGOs will go beyond subsistence-level activities and become nation-building agents. By definition, they simply cannot.

There are two distinct possibilities in front of us to bring about real and significant increases in individual productivity and, thus, to build an economically prosperous Bangladesh. Either one, or both, can be undertaken.

Option 1:

Bangladesh already possesses rudimentary capabilities to locally produce durable, intermediate and capital goods. However, the aforementioned alliance has systematically destroyed and/or suppressed these capabilities in order to protect the earnings from "economic rent" attainable through the importation of these categories of goods.

The means used to destroy/suppress local industries are (a) imposing unusually high taxes on raw materials needed to produce these goods, (b) depriving the local entrepreneurs of needed energy, capital and land, and (c) imposing negligible import taxes on these goods.

So, a true nationalistic/patriotic CG (or any patriotic politician) must do everything possible to get local production of these categories of goods underway. Thus, it should

institute a favorable tax structure so as to facilitate the domestic production of durable, intermediate and capital goods. It should ensure that local entrepreneurs have easy access to all that is necessary to successfully produce these goods.

True and successful nationalists like Mahathir Muhammad of Malaysia, Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore, or Park Chung Hee of South Korea went much farther and adopted state-controlled protectionist policies at the initial stages of development. For example, Mahathir Muhammad instituted as high as 300% import tax on automobiles in order to protect the domestic production and marketing of the Malaysian car "Proton Saga."

Option 2:

The newly industrialized countries (NICs) of Southeast Asia, including South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, China as well as Japan are constantly looking for low-wage countries to produce parts and components of their durable, intermediate and capital goods and, in the process, built vital local industries through technology diffusion.

The CG must initiate, and actually undertake, these policies and programs right away. Otherwise, the current crackdown would be meaningless, and certainly questionable.

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Women trafficking in Bangladesh

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ESTERDAY was International Women's Day. Every year we celebrate this day with lots of hope to change the world into a better place for discriminated, vulnerable women. But the days remain the same. In Bangladesh, women are victims of discrimination in different ways in every aspect of life in society.

Here, I want to discuss about women trafficking in Bangladesh because, nowadays, it is a very dangerous trend in society. A large number of women's lives have turned into hell because of this vicious practice.

Nari pachar, Bangla for trafficking of women, has been one of the most urgent human rights problems during recent years in Bangladesh. As many as fifty women and children are reportedly taken out of Bangladesh every day, and sold into forced prostitution, organ trade or slave labour.

Thousands of Asian men, women and children are being trafficked within, and across, borders annually. Bangladesh continues to face a significant internal and international trafficking problem.

Bangladesh is a source, and transit point, for men, women and children for the purposes of sexual exploitation, involuntary domestic servitude, child camel jockeying, and debt bondage. Women and children from Bangladesh are trafficked to India and Pakistan for sexual exploitation. Bangladeshi women migrate legally to the Gulf states – Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, the U.A.E. and Saudi Arabia – for work as domestic servants, but often find themselves in situations of involuntary servitude.

In addition, Bangladeshi boys are trafficked to the Gulf to serve as camel jockeys and as bonded labourers in the fishing industry. Women and girls from rural areas are trafficked internally for sexual exploitation and domestic servitude. Burmese women are trafficked through Bangladesh to India for sexual exploitation.

Female migration has, consequently, been pushed underground and has become an illegal practise. This policy restricting female migration is remarkable, given the fact that Bangladesh is a labour-exporting

nation. It is one of the densest populated countries in the world, and the remittances that the migrant workers send home is a large source of income for the country.

Over the last decade, 200,000 Bangladeshi girls were lured under false promises and sold to the sex industry in nations including Pakistan, India and the Middle East.

A non-government source reports that about 200,000 women and children have been trafficked to the Middle East in the last 20 years. Different human rights activists and agencies estimate that 200-400 young women and children are smuggled out every month, most of them from Bangladesh to Pakistan.

The Indian Social Welfare Board estimates that there are 500,000 foreign prostitutes in India, 1% of whom are from Bangladesh, and 2.7% of prostitutes in Kolkata are from Bangladesh (Bangladesh Cedaw Report).

Every day, over 50 women and children are trafficked out of Bangladesh through the border areas. 500 Bangladeshi women are illegally transported into Pakistan every day. (Press Statement, Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association).

Now we can understand what a devastating picture it is! In Bangladesh, the collection points for trafficked women are usually far from the border points. Women rescued in Dinajpur (in the north) were from Cox's Bazar (in the south). Girls from the southern part of Bangladesh are usually trafficked across the northern borders.

In Kushtia area, some villages are used as stations for the traffickers. The Rajshahi border villages Bidirup and Premtali are used because there are fewer checkpoints. Jessori border is very popular with traffickers.

Traffickers use 20 main points in 16 western districts near the Indian border. The main trafficking route is Dhaka-Mumbai-Karachi-Dubai. Many of the victims end up in Middle East nations.

Female migration is larger and more varied than in the trafficking scenario. Often the rigid concept exists that migratory movement takes place predominantly under coercion, or when women lose control and other people take advantage of them, whereas this is not

always the fact. While the risks of exploitation are considerable, the earnings women make abroad are impressive as well. Many female migrant workers have returned to Bangladesh with substantial savings, an enhanced sense of well-being and greater confidence in their ability to take decisions and cope autonomously.

Most often, people's perception is that trafficked girls are kidnapped and taken away from their homes completely against their will. Although this sometimes happens, in most of the cases a girl will decide to go along with the trafficker herself, or under pressure from her family.

Traffickers will look for girls from poor and vulnerable families in villages, and tempt them and their parents with offers of lucrative jobs, a good marriage or a comfortable life in neighbouring countries. Only when they have taken her over the border and to her final destination will she find out what kind of circumstances she will be forced to work in.

If we go through the causes of trafficking, we can realise that they are rooted in the very depths of our society. Here I am showing a few causes, such as pseudo-marriage, dowry demand, unequal power relations, and discrimination in the family by gender and age, negligible decision-making status of women in financial matters, negative attitude toward women and female children, social stigma against single, unwed and widowed women, misinterpretation of religion regarding women, religious fundamentalism, complications out of conditionality and fraudulent practices in marriages/after marriages, child marriage, polygamy, or incompatible marriages, easy divorce, frustration in love and failure in conjugal life, entitlements for better life, e.g. job and prospect of marriage, increased dependency of guardians on the income of their female children, natural disasters making families homeless and disintegrated, acute poverty forcing parents to abandon their children, lack of shelter for women in distress, inefficiency of the law-enforcing agency, and women being released from jail/hazat are given to guardians/custodians without proper/legal verification.

Bangladesh should assign greater priority and resources to its law enforcement response to trafficking. Prevention programmes must

address factors that increase the vulnerability of migrants or potential migrants, such as poverty, and discrimination on the basis of class, ethnicity and gender.

Trafficking and migration are inter-linked. Anti-trafficking organisations and organisations working on all aspects of migration can collaborate in designing programs, and researching and strategising to achieve safer migration.

Prevention of trafficking requires cooperation and support between governments, inter-governmental organisations, NGOs, local communities and the migrants themselves, and between countries of origin, transit and destination. Government of country must take responsibility for their citizens, both at home and abroad.

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DHIRAJ KUMAR NATH

PAZILA Parishad election, to be or not to be, is a widely discussed issue across the country. Political activists and social workers at the Upazila level are frequently asking the question about the possibility of Upazila election.

Some people are, in fact, anxious to establish themselves as political leaders, or as persons to reckon with, at the Upazila level.

On the other hand, civil society organizations and think-tanks of the nation strongly feel the urgency of strengthening local govt. at the Upazila level, prior to the parliamentary election.

They believe that the elected representatives at grassroots level will be a competent and appropriate authority to ensure good governance, dispense justice and accelerate progress, with adequate accountability and transparency in performance.

Upazila Parishad introduced in 1982:

With the promulgation of Local Government (Upazila Parishad and Upazila Administration Reorganization) Ordinance, 1982 (LIX of 1982), there was a ray of hope that the local level administration might find an administration to satisfy the expectations of the public at large.

In 1985, people observed a direct election for Upazila chairman, creating a scenario of emerging as desired. Thana Nirbahi Officers, posted at different Upazila in phases, were successful in generating a sense of awareness in favour of strong local government.

The Ordinance of 1982 envisaged a few transferred subjects to the Upazila Parishad, such as health and family welfare, primary education, agriculture, fisheries and livestock, forestry and environment.

It was not a decision with enough thought or specific vision, supported with in-depth feasibility study, to present to the nation an appropriate local government.

It was perhaps, the result of Upazila Parishad elections in 1985, where supporters of president Ershad occupied around 200 seats.

Since then, confusion continued in the political circles about the election for Upazila Parishad, and its necessity for modifying the organizational structure into one appropriate for the country. Of course, the Upazila Parishad Act, 1998, clearly indicated the election of public representatives as the way for effective management of the local government. Similarly, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on April 5, 2005, strongly recommended reintroduction of the Upazila Parishad for strengthening the local government system in the country.

Upazila Parishad: Why?

It is a well-known fact that the members of parliament do not even attend the parliament regularly, not to speak of their contributions in law making for the welfare of the nation.

A study of the Transparency International revealed how some members of parliament failed to deliberate in the parliament, and did not involve themselves in the process of lawmaking, their primary obligation.

This has resulted in losses for the exchequer also. Some observers believe that the election to the Upazila Parishad might bring some benefits to the nation, and help develop a system to streamline public life and bring some discipline and decorum.

The election to the Upazila will prompt local level politicians to engage themselves in some activities, and demonstrate

their sagacity and tenacity.

On the other hand, persons with experience and intellectual background representing the civil society will get the scope to occupy a place in the parliament and involve themselves in framing Acts and Ordinances appropriate to the genius of the nation and requirement of the country.

The elected chairman, by virtue of his position, will be responsible for looking into the affairs of the Upazila, like health services delivery system, primary education, agriculture, fisheries and livestock, forestry and environment. The Parishad can effectively monitor law and order, overview trade and industry, identify traffickers, hoarders, and can control the criminals.

Local level planning is possible only when the Upazila can operate effectively. The rapid urbanization, as observed, is due to the massive migration of the rural population to the capital, and the big cities, for employment, education and social security.

Experience of the past: In 1983, thana training and development centers of the country suddenly became the hub of planning and development with the posting of senior magistrates as Thana Nirbahi Officers. A few substantial impediments were identified. They are as follows:

- Political pressure from members of the parliament for each project and program appeared as disincentive for the TNO to act independently.
- The lack of transparency in the Upazila elections, due to unwanted influence from the chairman in power.
- The difference of opinion between TNO and the chairman, creating a bottleneck in the normal administration.
- The frequent transfers and posting of Thana level officers
- The interference in the magistracy and the judiciary functioning at the Upazila level sharply eroded the confidence of the public.
- The reluctance of lawyers to move to the Upazila for trying

cases created a major hurdle to quick dispensing of justice